



PANDANALLUR BANI, A DELECTABLE BLEND OF TRADITION, MUSICALITY, AESTHETICS AND ANTIQUITY

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ABSTRACT

This article is about the Pandanallur¹ bani² of Bharatanatyam. In a world where old and authentic banis are fast fading, the Pandanallur bani sparkles as a gem in the firmament of Bharatanatyam even to this day. Nurtured with painstaking devotion by the great masters including Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai³ and others, this bani has produced many dancing stars including several senior practitioners of today. Embellished with pristine musical values and extremely clean nrta⁴ aesthetics, the Pandanallur bani has brought name and fame to the small village that is its source. Shorn of any manner of jazzy gimmicks, this austere bani is a reminder of Bharatanatyam as imagined by the great masters - simple, classy and subtle. Characterised by an old world charm that is typical of vintage Bharatanatyam, the Pandanallur bani is at once challenging for the dancer, yet gentle on the eye. It is a natyadharma⁵ based style with steadfast devotion to tradition and antiquity. The proximity of Pandanallur to Tanjore⁶ may have ensured that the Pandanallur Bani in many ways reflects the values and aesthetics that the Tanjore quartet stood for. The architects of the Pandanallur bani eschewed anything that was loud. Instead, they chose to keep the style mellow, subtle, tasteful, delicate and pleasing. In the recent past, they also swiftly moulded the repertoire, presentation, techniques in order to keep with the changing times, thus ensuring that the Pandanallur bani has stood the test of time and has been passed down even to the most recent of generations with no loss of values or aesthetics.

KEYWORDS: Bharatanatyam, Pandanallur, Bani, Tanjore, Tanjore Quartet, Meenakshisundaram Pillai.

INTRODUCTION:

The Pandanallur Bani is a proud offspring of a small village in the Tiruvadamarudur⁷ taluk of the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu- Pandanallur. It rose to prominence due to the genius of the natyacharyas⁸ that it produced. One of the stalwarts who hailed from this village but belonged to the clan of the Tanjore quartet was the inimitable Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai who lived for the most part of his life in his ancestral village. Many first-generation star dancers including Ramgopal⁹, Mrinalini Sarabhai¹⁰, U S Krishna Rao¹¹ were his pupils.

Technique:

The Pandanallur bani is nothing but an offshoot of the main Thanjavur bani. Thanjavur and the Tanjore quartet are for all practical purposes the fountainhead of all of Bharatanatyam dance. However, the formidable genius of the nattuvanars of Pandanallur village and the large number of students that they groomed contributed towards making Pandanallur a distinctive bani by itself.

The Pandanallur bani has a rich and diverse adavu¹² vocabulary. An orthodox and chaste bani, the adherence to paddhati¹³ or tradition is seen in every moment of the dance. Linearity and lyricism, precision and poetry, symmetry and sinuosity go hand in hand. A gamut of interpretations is conveyed through the simple flick of the eye or the turn of the arm.

Commitment to anga shuddha¹⁴ and araimandi¹⁵ is steadfast. The adavus, as visualised by the Pandanallur vaadyars¹⁶ have complex rhythmic patterns. Emphasis is on symmetry and harmony as well as intense musicality, purity, precision. Anything that is extra or pretentious is shunned. The lyricism and musicality of this bani are intense. Melody and movement flow hand in hand. The two are as inseparable as the word and its meaning, truly reflecting the phrase *vaagarthaaviva samprktow- vaagartha Prati pathhaye*¹⁷.

In the evocation of mood and metaphor, the emphasis is on natyadharma¹⁸ or the stylistic and suggestive mode of interpretation, rather than on lokadharma¹⁹ the more colloquial style. Understated style is the hallmark of this vazhi¹⁸, rather than any overt drama. The lilting gait or the kulukku nadai¹⁹ is a constant element and serves as the scaffolding on which the Abhinaya sequences are constructed. Slow evolution and progressions are the guiding lights of this bani. It is an exquisitely graceful style that suits both the male and the female body naturally.

Clarity of hastas²¹ and the wide sweep of the arms are the hallmark of this bani. Meandering digressions in the name of sanchari bhava²² are not encouraged in this style. The footwork is strong and each step is delivered with great clarity. There is an undercurrent of a rhythm even in the most sedate and slow-paced movement. The jumps (utplavanas), spins or pirouettes (bhramaris) and lightning paced movements are delivered with ease and grace in a way that it gives the audience a feeling of calm and peace.

The Pandanallur bani is characterised by a gentleness in the delivery of abhinaya. It is succinct and subtle, with the audience always left wanting more. Very many repetitions are seldom performed for the "hands". The nattuvanars of

Pandanallur were acutely aware of the ill repute that had been attributed to dance and thus made sure at all times that no movement came across as crass or crude. The portrayal of padams²³ and javalis²⁴ were as subtle and nuanced as possible.

The focus is always on content rather than packaging. Senior dancer Smt Alarmel Valli states that her Guru insisted on favouring sarakku (content) over glitter (minukku). One rarely finds unwanted prolonged poses and acrobatic pose in this bani. Holding poses for a prolonged duration with the intention of eliciting applause from the audience is a practice that is abhorred by the Pandanallur seniors. Adavus with generous use of the natyarambham²⁵ position is used frequently in this bani.

Some of the pandanallur giants include Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai (1869-1954), Chockalingam Pillai (1893-1968) (Periya vadyar) and Subbaraya pillai (Chinna Vadyar).

Though a purist who hailed from an extremely traditional background, Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai was broad minded enough to accept male disciples and teach them in what was until then the domain of the female dancer alone.

The Pandanallur masters laid immense stress on anga shuddha and araimandi. Even in his autumn years, Chokkalingam pillai insisted on mentoring not just his senior students but also teach the junior ones. He meticulously used the thattukazhi²⁶ to maintain time, thus instilling in the pupils a sharp sense of laya²⁷.

Beauty in azhuttam²⁸ and fluidity in forcefulness are few of the ideals of the Pandanallur bani. Covering the stage is important too. The dancer is expected to dance in a pleasant manner and avoid jerky movements. Their approach to footwork is gentle but precise. The arudhis²⁹ are short, but exciting and make the audience sit on the edge of the seat. Pandanallur Jayalakshmi, Pandanallur Pandian, Alarmel Valli, Meenakshi Chittaranjan are few of the torch bearers of the Pandanallur bani today.

The repertoire and musical values:

The Pandanallur gurus favoured the margam³⁰ to thematic presentations. As devotees of the old and traditional method of dancing, the Pandanallur nattuvanars preferred solo margam performances. Hence even today, most of the stars of this bani are soloists. The margam opens with the alarippu³¹. The pushpanjali³² and thodayamangalam³³ are not usually performed, since it was not a part of the margam created by the Tanjore quartet. Similarly, Kautuvams³⁴ were not presented on stage, since they are believed to be part of the Koil Paramparai (repertoire for temple worship). Jatiswarams³⁵ are a cherished part of the repertoire. The post varnam³⁶ segment of the concert features Padams and javalis. Krtis of Gopalakrishna Bharati³⁷ and Mahakavi Bharati³⁸, like Dikku theriyaadha Kattil, Teeraada vilayaatu pillai are sometimes performed.

A speciality of the Pandanallur bani is a pada varnam in the raga Vachaspati, composed by shri Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai and performed by his disciple Pandanallur Jayalakshmi. This piece was performed in honour of the

Maharaja of Ramanathapuram, Shri Shanmukha Rajeswara Sethupathi. The dance was supposed to be so beautiful that the maharaja promptly wed her.

Pandanallur Subbaraya Pillai emphasised that music ought to be internalised fully before it could flow forth as a movement. He stated that the music was the most important inspiration for the creation of dance (the old masters preferred not to use the word “choreography”) Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram pillai, like many of his illustrious colleagues used to compose the “hands” as they sang. Thus, music and dance flowed as one unit- music was visual dance and dance was music to the eyes.

Songs / music are given great importance and adavus are designed to suit them. In this respect, one can say that the music is given as much space as it demands and then the movements are set in a manner whereby, they embellish the music. The concept of fixing the dance sequence first and then tailor making the music accordingly is strictly forbidden in this bani. The jatis have complex sollukattus that are delivered in small and tight capsules. The rendition of the jatis is easy and free of any unnecessary frills. Vallinam - mellinam or the modulation is given a great deal of importance though. The adavus are matched exactly to the sollukattus. The concept of “cross rhythm” is kept to a minimum.

In the Abhinaya pieces such as padams and javalis, if the sahitya of a particular stanza or charanam is lewd or vulgar, the entire charanam is dropped. The vocalist can sing comfortably, since the Pandanallur bani seldom superimposes complex korvais on top of the swara segments. Thus, the grouping of swaras, as imagined by the composer is retained in all its beauty.

CONCLUSION:

One can safely say that the Pandanallur Bani is a delectable blend of tradition, musicality, aesthetics and antiquity. It is thus not surprising that it is still one of the most sought after banis of Bharatanatyam.

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NOTES:

1. Pandanallur is a village in Tamil Nadu.
2. Bani means way or style. There are about 4-6 banis in Bharatanatyam.
3. Guru Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai (1869-1964) is considered to be responsible for shaping the Pandanallur Bani in the post-modern period.
4. Pure dance. It contains abstract movements which are set to rhythmical timings
5. Stylized methods of portrayal vis a vis the Lokadharmi style which is more colloquial
6. A city in Tamil Nadu. Earlier known as Thanjavur or Thanjai, it was the capital of the Nayak and Maratha rulers and was a hub of music and dance.
7. It is situated in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. Its headquarters is the town of Tiruvudaimarudur.
8. Dance gurus. They were also known as Nattuvanars
9. Ram Gopal (1912-2003) was an Indian dancer and modernist, who put Indian dance on the world map with his pathbreaking work
10. Mrinalini Sarabhai (1918-2016) was an Indian dancer, choreographer and instructor who founded the Darpana Academy of Performing arts.
11. US Krishna Rao (1912-2005) was a prominent dancer, Guru and author.
12. Adavu is the basic unit of dance. If dance is a language, the adavus are the alphabets that make up this language
13. Paddhati may be loosely translated as methodology
14. Anga shuddha is the neatness in body work. It means eschewing unnecessary movements and maintaining neat lines and firm stances
15. Also known as ardha mandalam or Aayatam. This half sitting posture is the basic stance of Bharatanatyam
16. Dance gurus or mentors
17. This shloka by Kalidasa describes the oneness of Lord Siva and Parvati.
18. Another word for bani
19. A technique of walking where the knees are bent and locked alternatingly.
20. Expressive dancing

21. Hasta means hand. In dance parlance, hastas means the different ways of describing a word or a line using hand gestures.
22. Elaborations; sometimes stories are depicted to highlight the point being made in the lyrics
23. Slow paced songs which usually are erotic in content
24. Briskly paced love songs. The lyrics are usually colloquial in nature
25. Quite literally the “beginning of dance”. In this position, the arms are splayed out at the shoulder level.
26. A stick used to maintain time, while teaching dance.
27. rhythm
28. Firmness
29. Short rhythmic sequences performed usually at the end of a jati or kOrvai.
30. A collection of dance numbers that make up a standard Bharatanatyam recital.
31. One of the common invocatory items in Bharatanatyam.
32. Another common invocatory piece. It is believed to be a later day addition to the margam
33. A common piece in the Bhajana Sampradaya. It is a recent addition into the Bharatanatyam Margam.
34. Short items in which the lyrics are recited and then sung. They were performed as part of worship in the temples.
35. Nrta pieces were adavu sequences are danced to swara patterns.
36. The main piece of a Bharatanatyam margam. It is a long item with elaborate nrta and abhinaya.
37. Gopalakrishna Bharati (1810-1896) was a prominent composer in the tamizh language
38. Mahakavi subramania Bharati (1882-1921) was a revolutionary tamil poet
39. Rhythmic sequences with scope for nrta renditions.